



After years of decline, the Biden administration says environmental enforcement is on the upswing

By MATTHEW DALY and
MICHAEL PHILLIS

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency conducted more on-site inspections of polluting industrial sites this year than any time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency said Monday as it seeks to reinvigorate its enforcement program after more than a decade of budget cuts. EPA opened nearly 200 criminal investigations this year, a 70% increase over 2022, the agency said in a report. It completed nearly 1,800 civil settlements, a 9% increase over 2022. More than half the inspections and settlements involved poor and disadvantaged communities long scarred by pollution, the agency said, reflecting the Biden administration's emphasis on environmental justice issues. But some parts of EPA's enforcement efforts still lag. In 2023, for example, it charged 102 defendants criminally.



The Fifth Ward Elementary School and residential neighborhoods sit near the Denka Performance Elastomer Plant, back, in Reserve, La., Sept. 23, 2022.

Associated Press
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After years of decline, the Biden administration says environmental enforcement is on the upswing

Continued from Front

The Trump administration charged more every year, although most years only marginally. Nearly 200 defendants were charged in the latter years of the Obama administration. There is, however, an uptick in the number of criminal cases they've opened recently.

EPA said its enforcement and compliance work have resulted in the reduction, treatment, elimination or minimization of 1.84 billion pounds of pollutants, and required violators to pay over \$704 million in penalties, fines, and restitution. The dollar amount is a 57% increase over 2022.

This comes even as the EPA's enforcement staff remains far below its peak of more than a decade ago, even as officials move to add about 300 positions. The increase in staffing comes after EPA eliminated approximately 950 enforcement positions following budget cuts imposed since 2011.

The 2011 budget and debt deal, which included automatic spending cuts, "hit all agencies hard, but hit EPA especially hard," said David Uhlmann, EPA's assistant administrator for enforcement. Enforcement efforts were further hampered by an inability to complete many on-site inspections during the pandemic, which be-



This photo taken with a drone shows portions of a Norfolk and Southern freight train that derailed the night before in East Palestine, Ohio, on Feb. 4, 2023.

Associated Press

gan nearly four years ago, and a series of actions by former President Donald Trump to roll back environmental regulations.

"While our work is not complete, EPA's revitalized enforcement program is making a positive difference in communities across America, particularly for people living in underserved and overburdened communities that for too long have borne the brunt of pollution," Uhlmann said in a statement. Uhlmann, who was confirmed as EPA's enforcement chief in July after a two-year delay, said in an interview that enforcement efforts are "still a struggle" at the environmental agency. "We can't replace a dec-

ade of staff cuts in one year, but I feel good that enforcement levels are back up to where they were prior to the pandemic," he said.

"EPA has increased enforcement activities across the nation," he said. "Polluters who broke the law are being brought to justice." EPA sued Norfolk Southern railway over a train derailment in eastern Ohio that spilled hazardous chemicals and forced thousands of people to evacuate. Federal officials want to ensure the company pays for the cleanup.

The agency also sued Denka Performance Elastomer LLC, arguing that its petrochemical operations in southern Louisiana posed

an unacceptable cancer risk to the mostly-Black community nearby. The EPA has demanded that the company reduce toxic emissions from its plant that makes synthetic rubber.

The Biden administration also went to court to try to help the troubled Jackson, Mississippi, water system, which suffered a near-total collapse in 2022 after a heavy rainstorm.

In May, the EPA reached a deal with a BP subsidiary that required the company to reduce harmful pollution from its refinery in Indiana. The company also agreed to pay a \$40 million penalty under the Clean Air Act.

The agency has set climate change and environmen-

tal justice as top priorities for enforcement, along with dangerous chemicals known as PFAS that are linked to a broad range of health issues, coal ash contamination, safe drinking water, prevention of toxic air pollution and chemical accident prevention, Uhlmann said.

Uhlmann, a longtime environmental law professor at the University of Michigan Law School, declined to give a letter grade to the agency's overall efforts. But given budget constraints and other issues, his staff was "hitting it out of the park" over the past year, he said.

Democrats and environmental groups blasted the Trump administration's enforcement efforts, especially during COVID-19, with one senator saying a "pandemic of pollution" had been released.

The EPA under Trump weakened regulations dealing with fuel efficiency and mercury emissions and waived enforcement on a range of public health and environmental mandates, saying industries could have trouble complying with them during the pandemic. The rollbacks were among dozens of actions by the EPA to ease requirements on industry to monitor, report and reduce toxic pollutants, heavy metals and climate-damaging fossil fuel emissions. □

U.S. closes 2 rail crossings in Texas so agents can help process migrants



Migrants wait to climb over concertina wire after they crossed the Rio Grande and entered the U.S. from Mexico, Saturday, Sept. 23, 2023, in Eagle Pass, Texas.

Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas

U.S. authorities temporarily shut down two railroad border crossings in Texas on Monday to shift officers to helping process migrants, drawing warnings from rail operators that the temporary closures would hamper trade ahead of Christmas. The decision by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to suspend operations at rail crossings in Eagle Pass and El Paso adds another tension point over immigration amid a struggle in Washington between the White House and Senate ne-

gotiators to reach a deal on border security. At the same time, Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott was preparing to sign a new law that would give police sweeping new powers to arrest migrants on illegal entry and empower local judges to order them to leave the country. "After observing a recent resurgence of smuggling organizations moving migrants through Mexico via freight trains, CBP is taking additional actions to surge personnel and address this concerning development, including in partnership

with Mexican authorities," the agency said in a statement. Last month, CBP also closed down one of two international bridges in Eagle Pass for the same reason. Similar actions were taken in other busy parts of the border, including Lukeville, Arizona, and San Diego. Union Pacific said the two crossings in Texas account for 45% of its cross-border business and urged the government to reopen the locations immediately. It said each day the border is closed would halt the movement of goods on nearly 4,500 rail cars. □

DOJ creates database to track records of misconduct by federal law enforcement

By CLAUDIA LAUER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER
Associated Press

The U.S. Justice Department has created a database to track records of misconduct by federal law enforcement officers that is aimed at preventing agencies from unknowingly hiring problem officers, officials said on Monday.

The federal move is a step toward accountability amid growing calls to close loopholes that allow law enforcement officers to be rehired by other agencies after losing their jobs or resigning after misconduct allegations. The creation of the database was part of President Joe Biden's May 2022 executive order on policing, which included dozens of measures aimed at increasing accountability for federal law enforcement officers.

"This database will ensure that records of serious misconduct by federal law enforcement officers are readily available to agencies considering hiring those officers," Biden said in a statement.

But the database, which will only contain records for federal officers and not be open to the public, falls short of the national misconduct database called for by some police reform advocates.

The National Law Enforce-



The Justice Department in Washington, Nov. 18, 2022.

Associated Press

ment Accountability Database currently includes only former and current Justice Department officers who have records of serious misconduct over the last seven years. It will be expanded in the next two months to capture other federal law enforcement agencies such as the Secret Service and United States Park Police, a Justice Department official said. Attorney General Merrick Garland said it will give federal agencies "an important new tool for vetting and hiring officers and agents that will help strengthen our ef-

forts" to build and retain the public's trust.

"No law enforcement agency — including the Justice Department — can effectively do its work without the trust of the public," Garland said in an emailed statement.

Federal agencies will be responsible for reporting and updating records for officers who faced criminal convictions, civil judgments, terminations, suspensions, resigning or retiring while under investigation and sustained complaints or disciplinary actions for serious miscon-

duct, officials said. Serious misconduct includes excessive force, obstruction of justice, findings of bias or discrimination, making a false report, making a false statement under oath, theft and sexual misconduct.

The database is currently only accessible by Justice Department employees and will eventually be expanded to allow access by users in other federal law enforcement agencies, as well as state and local law enforcement agencies, a Justice Department official said. The Bureau of Justice Statistics will produce an

annual public report on the database, but the report will not include individual incident data and will be anonymized to protect the privacy of officers, officials said.

The majority of police interactions happen at the state and local level, but policing is decentralized with states and departments largely responsible for determining training standards and disciplinary decisions.

Several state legislatures have created statewide databases in recent years to track disciplinary misconduct and officer decertification, which happens when a state licensing body revokes the certification or license required to be a law enforcement officer in that state. But few of those state databases are open to the public, and few are shared between states.

The International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training has also created a national repository for officer decertification that boasts more than 53,000 records from 49 state agencies. However, providing the records and using the records is voluntary and the database does not include any other disciplinary measures such as firings or suspensions. □

FDA finds 'extremely high' lead levels in cinnamon at Ecuador plant that made tainted fruit pouches

By JONEL ALECCIA
AP Health Writer

U.S. food inspectors found "extremely high" levels of lead in cinnamon at a plant in Ecuador that made applesauce pouches tainted with the metal, the Food and Drug Administration said Monday. The recalled pouches have been linked to dozens of illnesses in U.S. kids.

Cinnamon tested from the

plant had lead levels more than 2,000 times higher than a maximum level proposed by the FDA, officials said.

The samples came from ground or powdered cinnamon from Negasmart, an Ecuadorian company that supplied the spice to Austrofoods, which made the pouches.

The applesauce pouches were sold under three

brands — WanaBana, Schnucks and Weis.

FDA said lead has not been detected in any products made without cinnamon and sold in the U.S.

The agency continues to investigate how the cinnamon was contaminated. Jim Jones, who heads the agency's human foods program, said in an interview with Politico last week that the lead contamina-



This image provided by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Thursday, Nov. 17, 2023, shows three recalled applesauce products - WanaBana apple cinnamon fruit puree pouches, Schnucks-brand cinnamon-flavored applesauce pouches and variety pack, and Weis-brand cinnamon applesauce pouches.

Associated Press

tion appeared to be "an intentional act." One theory is that the cinnamon may have been

contaminated for economic reasons, agency officials said. □

Florida deputy's legal team says he didn't have an obligation to stop Parkland school shooter

By **TERRY SPENCER**

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP)

— A former Florida sheriff's deputy is claiming he had no legal duty to confront the gunman who murdered 17 people and wounded 17 others at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School nearly six years ago, his attorney argued Monday.

The legal team representing Broward County Deputy Scot Peterson asked a judge to dismiss the lawsuit brought by the victims' families and survivors, even though the decision would likely be derided by the public.

Attorney Michael Piper told Circuit Judge Carol-Lisa Phillips that under the law, his client cannot be sued for anything he did or didn't do during the Feb. 14, 2018, massacre. He cited appellate court cases that say police officers don't have a legal obligation to protect others from third-party harm and cannot be sued for decisions they make during a crisis.

Piper said that while it might not be a popular decision, the judge must uphold the law and throw out the lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages. There are also suits filed against Broward Sheriff's Office and two school security guards.

Gunman Nikolas Cruz, a



Former Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School School Resource Officer Scot Peterson, right, speaks with his attorney, Michael Piper, during a break in a hearing regarding the MSD civil case at the Broward County Courthouse in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Monday, Dec. 18, 2023.

Associated Press

25-year-old former Stoneman Douglas student, is serving a life sentence for the murders and attempted murders.

"There is a difference between legal duty and what I guess I'll call societal expectations," the attorney for the sheriff's deputy argued. All the public will hear is that Peterson was in uniform and had a gun, he said, yet "When faced with this murderous rampage going on in this three-story building, he doesn't have a duty to stop it?"

"People are outraged," Piper said, of the notion that a law enforcement officer doesn't have a duty. "Yes, that is exactly what we are saying. That is exactly what the law is."

But attorneys David Brill and Joel Perwin, representing the families and survivors, told the judge that Peterson's actions both during and before the shooting fall outside the law's protections because they were made in bad faith and with willful negligence. Perwin said that according to Piper's argument, Florida

police officers could not be sued if they kept walking when they witnessed a robber attacking a liquor store clerk.

Piper countered that while that might be unpalatable to the public, that is legally correct.

Brill said Peterson knew that Cruz was nicknamed "Crazy Boy" by campus security guards when he was a student two years before the shooting — and that he was considered by school staff to be the one person who could shoot up the school.

Yet, he did not have Cruz committed for mental treatment before the shooting, Brill argued. And just before the shooting — when Peterson learned Cruz had been spotted back on campus carrying a bag and backpack — the deputy didn't order an immediate lock down.

"His primary reason for being there was for the safety, health and welfare of the students and the faculty," Brill said of Peterson. "He had a duty to protect the administration, the teachers and students to a variety of unreasonable risks, including active shooters."

Sitting in the gallery, Peterson shook his head and grunted in disagreement during Brill's argument. The parents of two students who were killed, 15-year-old Luke Hoyer and 18-year-old Meadow Pollack, sat down just feet behind Peterson, who later moved to the other side of the courtroom. The hearing was ongoing Monday afternoon. Judge Phillips is not expected to immediately rule. The trial is expected to start next year, if it goes forward.

The families and survivors have already settled claims with the FBI — whose agents failed to investigate a warning about Cruz — and the Broward school district for a combined \$153 million. □

Senator's son appears in court on new homicide charge from crash that killed North Dakota deputy



This booking photo provided by the McLean County, N.D., Sheriff's Office shows Ian Cramer.

Associated Press

By **JACK DURA**
Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The 42-year-old son of U.S. Sen. Kevin Cramer appeared in court Monday on a new homicide charge in connection with the crash that killed a North Dakota sheriff's deputy.

The judge did not change the \$500,000 cash bond she set for him earlier this month. State District Court Judge Bobbi Weiler said she will schedule a preliminary hearing for Ian Cramer,

who is in jail. His attorney said he is gathering information for a mental health evaluation.

Last week the judge approved new charges that upgraded Cramer's initial manslaughter count to homicide while fleeing a peace officer in connection with the Dec. 6 death of Mercer County Sheriff's Deputy Paul Martin.

Cramer faces nine charges, including reckless endangerment and preventing arrest, related to the

pursuit and crash.

The senator said in a statement that his son has "serious mental disorders which manifest in severe paranoia and hallucinations." Ian Cramer's mother had driven him to a Bismarck hospital over concerns about his mental health, police said. When she got out of the family's SUV, her son took the wheel and crashed through a door to get out of an enclosed ambulance bay.

Authorities say he then fled

from deputies who spotted him in Hazen, about 70 miles (113 kilometers) northwest of Bismarck.

Cramer hit speeds of 100 mph (160 kph) and kept going even after a spiked device flattened two tires, according to court documents.

More spikes were set up and Cramer swerved and then crashed head-on into Martin's squad car, launching him about 100 feet (30 meters), authorities said. □

U.N. Security Council to vote on resolution urging cessation of hostilities in Gaza to deliver aid

By EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council delayed a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities in Gaza to allow unhindered access to deliver humanitarian aid to the massive number of civilians in need of food, water and medicine until Tuesday morning, as members intensified negotiations to try to avoid another veto by the United States. The council said Monday's vote would not take place, and diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the United States, Israel's closest ally, to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution.

A key issue is how to implement and sustain a desperately needed aid operation. Human Rights Watch accused Israel earlier Monday of deliberately starving Gaza's population by blocking the delivery of water, food and fuel, a method of warfare that it described as a war crime. The



Palestinians search for bodies and survivors in the rubble of a residential building destroyed in an Israeli airstrike, in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023.

Associated Press

United Nations' food agency reported on Dec. 14 that 56% of Gaza's households were experiencing "severe levels of hunger," up from 38% two weeks earlier.

The draft on the table Monday morning called for an "urgent and sustainable

cessation of hostilities" for humanitarian access to deliver aid. But this language is expected to be watered down to a "suspension" of hostilities or something possibly weaker to satisfy the Americans, the diplomats said, speaking on condi-

tion of anonymity because discussions have been private. The U.S. vetoed a Security Council resolution on Dec. 8 that was backed by almost all council members and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire

in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

The importance of a Security Council resolution is that it is legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council's requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, but though they are a significant barometer of world opinion.

The draft resolution that was being considered by the 15 council members on Monday recognizes that civilians in Gaza don't have access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications and medical services "essential for their survival." Also, it would express the council's "strong concern for the disproportionate effect that the conflict is having on the lives and well-being of children, women and other civilians in vulnerable situations." □

U.S. Indo-Pacific commander is 'very concerned' about escalation of China-Russia military ties

By MARI YAMAGUCHI
Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said Monday he is "very concerned" about increased joint military actions by China and Russia in the region.

Adm. John C. Aquilino spoke in Tokyo as another regional concern, North Korea, conducted its latest intercontinental ballistic missile test, underscoring the advancement of its capabilities.

Aquilino is meeting with Japanese defense officials ahead of a joint exercise, Keen Edge 24, early next year.

He urged China to stop escalating maritime confrontations with its neighbors, and said its increasing

military activity with Russia is a serious concern during Moscow's war in Ukraine.

"I view it as far beyond the marriage of convenience at this point in time" he said. "If you tied DPRK (North Korea) into that, the Russia-DPRK cooperation, and the fact that the only partner of the DPRK prior to that was (China), that's just a bad neighborhood and bad group to be in," Aquilino said.

North Korea has been pushing to expand cooperation with Russia and China. There have been concerns that the North has supplied missiles and other ammunition to Russia to support its war in Ukraine, in exchange for obtaining Russian missile technology.

Chinese and Russian

bombers had a joint flight last week over the East China Sea to the waters between Japan and the Korean Peninsula, causing Japanese fighter jets to scramble against them, according to Japan's Defense Ministry.

Japan has territorial disputes with China over the Japanese-controlled East China Sea islands which Beijing also claims. It considers China a threat to national security and is in the process of a rapid military buildup.

Japan is particularly concerned about China's increased joint activity with Russia's military around the Japanese coast.

China has growing tensions with other neighbors.

Standoffs between China

and the Philippines over a number of disputed offshore areas in the South China Sea have escalated this year. The United States has warned China that it is obligated to defend the

Philippines, its treaty ally, if Filipino forces come under attack. China has warned the U.S. to stay away from what it calls a purely Asian dispute.

China also activated sonar



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, Chinese naval frigate Binzhou takes part in a joint naval drills with Russian warships in the East China Sea on Dec. 27, 2022.

Associated Press

Serbia's opposition takes to the streets claiming election fraud in Sunday's vote

By JOVANA GEC
Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbia's weekend snap election was held in "unjust conditions," with multiple reports of irregularities, international observers said on Monday, as opponents of populist President Aleksandar Vucic took to the streets claiming the vote was rigged.

Political tensions spiked in the Balkan country over the parliamentary and local elections on Sunday. In Belgrade, several thousand people gathered in front of the state election commission headquarters, chanting "thieves," as opposition leaders moved to lodge formal complaints claiming fraud in the city election.

"We have hundreds and hundreds of complaints," said opposition politician Marinika Tepic. She and several other opposition politicians will camp inside the building that's the seat of the state election commission. "We will stay here for a while."

At one point, protesters broke through a fence surrounding the building and one young woman tried to



A man throws an egg at the electoral commission building as several thousand Serbian opposition supporters protest in Belgrade, Serbia, Monday, Dec. 18, 2023.

storm the entrance. Protesters threw eggs, tomatoes and rolls of toilet paper at the building.

Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party won the parliamentary vote, an early official count confirmed. However, in the Belgrade local election, an opposition group said it was robbed, would not recog-

nize the results and would demand a rerun of the ballot.

The Serbian president appeared on state RTS television on Monday evening, stating that the "election was fair" and that he wanted "to tell the people not to worry ... peace, law and order will prevail."

In a preliminary statement,

a mission made up of representatives of international rights watchdogs said the vote was "marred by harsh rhetoric, bias in the media, pressure on public sector employees and misuse of public resources."

"Election day was smoothly conducted but was marked by numerous procedural deficiencies, in-

cluding inconsistent application of safeguards during voting and counting, frequent instances of overcrowding, breaches in secrecy of the vote, and numerous instances of group voting," the conclusions said.

Vucic, who has been in power since 2012, has dismissed criticism from his opponents that his government curbed democratic freedoms while allowing corruption and organized crime to run rampant.

Under Vucic, Serbia became a candidate for EU membership, but the opposition accuses the bloc of turning a blind eye to the country's democratic shortcomings in return for stability in the Balkan region, still troubled after the wars of the 1990s.

The election pitted Vucic's SNS against the Serbia Against Violence opposition alliance, or SPN.

Vucic's party won nearly 47% of the ballots in the parliamentary vote, followed by Serbia Against Violence with 23%, according to a near-complete preliminary tally by the state election commission. □

Associated Press

15 suspected drug smugglers killed in clash with Thai soldiers near Myanmar border, officials say

BANGKOK (AP) — Fifteen suspected drug smugglers were killed and about 2 million methamphetamine tablets seized in northern Thailand near the Myanmar border after a shoot-out with Thai soldiers, Thai officials said.

The clash, which occurred Saturday night, came after the local army received a tip that there would be smuggling activity near the border in Chiang Rai province, said Phanurat Lukboon, acting secretary-general of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board. Officers found a group of about 20 people carrying backpacks in the area, Phanurat said on Sunday.

After the officers identified themselves and asked to inspect the bags, the group began shooting at them, he added.

The clash lasted around 15 minutes and the Thai officers were all safe, Phanurat said while on a visit to the site where the incident occurred. He thanked the officers for their help in "preventing these awful things from entering our country and destroying our youth." Seventeen backpacks made from fertilizer sacks were found with the suspected smugglers and more than 2 million methamphetamine pills were inside the bags, officials said. No arrests were made and

officials were still working to identify the 15 people killed in the clash and the origin of the drugs, according to the Office of the Narcotics Control Board.

On Wednesday, Thailand announced it had seized 50 million methamphetamine tablets in the western province of Kanchanaburi, also near the Myanmar border. It was said to be a record haul of the drug in the country. Myanmar has historically been Southeast Asia's main drug production area in part because of lax security measures in border areas where minority ethnic groups have long been fighting for greater autonomy. □



In this photo released by the Office of the Narcotics Control Board on Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023, acting secretary-general of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board Phanurat Lukboon, third right, talks to reporters as bags containing methamphetamine pills are displayed during a news conference in Chiang Rai province, Thailand.

Associated Press

Did you know about...?

The history and meaning of the Aruban florin

(Oranjestad)—Aruba Today is proud to officially introduce a new segment called Did you know about...?, where we dive into some (historical) facts of Aruba, its culture and way of living. In this first edition, we look back at the Aruban florin: its history, design and symbolism.

In Aruba, we know the 5, 10, 25 and 50 cent coins, along with the 1 and 5 Florin coin. Aruban Florin bills include the 10, 25, 50, 100, and rarely, the 200 bills. In Papiamentu we call our currency Florin, but the umbrella term for money is placa. Cents are called cen (pronounced: seng), both in the singular and plural form. Most coins are circular and their size depend on their worth. However, the 50 cent coin is easily recognizable by their square shape, as is the 5 Florin coin by their golden color. Every coin has the Aruban emblem carved on it, with the other side displaying the worth of the coin. The bigger 1 and 5 florin coins, however, contain the carving of the emblem on one side, while displaying the side profile of the Dutch king, Willem-Alexander, on the other side. When his mother, Princess Beatrix, was reigning queen, it was her profile that was carved on the two coins.

Outdated Aruban coins and their names

In the past, Aruban coins had distinctive names and also varied in worth. For example, a 5-cent coin was once called Dos placa; 10-cent coins were called debchi; 25-cent coins were called diez



placa and the 50-cent coin was once called Yotin (pronounced: jo-teen). We also used a distinctive coins worth 2 ½ cents, called placa too. However, this last coin is no longer in use and has become a relic of Aruban money. Back then, the 5-Florin coin used to also be square, but now it is circular.

Aruban bills: their design and symbolism

The Aruban Florin collection contains a variation of colorful bills, displaying incredibly detailed and beautiful designs that tell the story of Aruba on a single piece of paper.

Prior to 2019, the Aruban Florin bills were relatively simpler in design compared to now, but still included beautiful designs and colors, often

depicting local animals. These past designs were made by the Aruban artist Everino Fingal in 1990 up to 2019. Between 1990 and 1993, the 5 Florin coin was a bill. The Fingal designs also included a 500-Florin bill, which has now been discontinued.

In 2019, the Central Bank of Aruba commissioned a new design of the Aruba Florin bills, this time selecting artist and former art teacher, Nigel Matthew, to present his new design. Matthew kept the tradition of including local animals and the familiar colors on the bills. However, he included additional designs that represent the Aruban culture and link to the Indigenous inhabitants that were the first to set foot on the island.

Current design and symbolism

10 florin

On the 10-florin bill, you can see a *Turtuga blanco* (white turtle). The blue color symbolizes the blue Caribbean Sea. You can also see the ruins of the Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins, a coral motif, and the symbols of Cas Floria (traditional Aruban house design) with a piece of

mosaic.

25 florin

On this orange bill, you can see an Aruban medicinal plant called *Shoshoro*. The birds *Trupiaal*, *Shoco*, rock drawings, and the symbols of *Cas Floria* with a piece of mosaic are also depicted. There is also a *Purun di ceramica* (clay pot), in reference to the relics left behind by our indigenous ancestors.

50 florin

On this bill, we see the *Cododo* (blue lizard found on the ABC islands), *Cangreu di tera* (land crab), *Willem III Tower*, and again the symbols of *Cas Floria* with a piece of mosaic, as well as a beach plant called *Banana di rif*. The colors are pink/purple.

100 florin

This bill is green in color, representing nature. Here we see the *Yuwana* (iguana), *Aloe*, *Toteki* (lizard), the symbols of *Cas Floria* with a piece of mosaic, and a dance group performing the *Baile di cinta* (folkloric dance with silk ribbons).

200 florin

There is another bill with a value of 200 dollars. The brown color symbolizes the earth of Aruba. Here we see the *Dornasol* and the *Warawara*—both local birds, along with the symbols of *Cas Floria* with a piece of mosaic, the *Tuna cactus* plant, and the *Caha di orgel* (folkloric instrument, used for many traditional songs).

Extra fact:

the word “florin” supposedly is named after the Italian city of Florence or it's a reference to the Italian word “florino”, both explanations related to historical Italian currencies.□

Source: Placa, placa, placa by the National Library of Aruba



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Visit the island's hidden natural pools

(Oranjestad)—Amongst the countless beaches surrounding the island that are well-known and frequently visited, there are an additional two “hidden” natural pools that are situated in the northern coast of the island, two ideal stops in your tour itinerary.

Conchi (Natural Pool)

For many years, Conchi was the only natural pool that we had on the island.

Located in the Arikok National Park, near Boca Keto and the Daimari Ranch, Conchi—also known “Cura di Turtuga (Turtle's Cove) or just Natural Pool—is reachable with any 4x4 vehicle or by foot if you're up for a long hike. However, since it is part of the National Park, you must first get permission from park management to enter. You would have to purchase a day pass, and receive a wrist-

band as proof of payment. Once you've completed that, you are set!

If you decide to hike from the entrance of the Arikok National Park, this is also possible: do bring plenty of protective clothing and enough water and food—it could take you up to three hours to hike there!

However, when you eventually do get there, you



will be greeted with crystal blue water surrounded by a natural rock formation that protects you from the wild waves on the other side. Though the pool is located on the northern side of the island (where the sea is largely rough and largely no suitable for swimming), the pool itself is very calm. It's also relatively deep, and you can climb up the rocks and jump in!

Cave Pool

This relatively new pool appeared just a few years ago, when a part of the dried up coral floor broke off and created a partition between the ocean and what is now the natural pool that is hidden there. Because it's still so new, there is no official name for it, but most people just call it the cave pool.

Just like the Conchi, the new natural pool is situated on the northern coast of Aruba. However, this pool is

much easier to reach with any type of vehicle, and there is no hiking needed. This spot has also become a regular stop for touring visitors.

When you get there, maybe you won't be able to spot the pool immediately, because you will probably notice the moon-shaped lagoon where wild northern waves crash into each other. Sounds scary, but if you look down on your right, you'll see a calm, crystal blue little pool in the corner. To get there, you have to climb down some stairs. Be careful when climbing down and follow the instructions of your tour guide if you have one.

And just like Conchi, this pool also has a jumping spot, and a rope to climb back up the boulder. □

Picture of cave pool is credited to RockaBeach Tours



Experience Aruban culture with this exciting theme night featuring a Carnival show, mixology bar, local artists and more. You can sample Aruban cuisine, including delicious BBQ options with a tropical twist. A local brass band will be performing, and you can pose with elaborately dressed Carnival dancers for a memorable photo op as well, so don't miss it.

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Aruba to me

ORANJESTAD — You are back and we would like to portrait you! By inviting you to send us your favorite vacation picture while enjoying our Happy Island.

Complete the sentence: Aruba to me is Send your picture with that text (including your name and where you are from) to: news@arubatoday.com and we will publish your vacation memory. Isn't that a special way to keep your best moments alive? Please do note: By submitting photos, text or any other materials, you give permission to The Aruba Today Newspaper, Caribbean Speed Printers and any of its affiliated companies to use said materials, as well as names, likeness, etc. for

promotional purposes without compensation. Last but not least: check out our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again.

For today we received a lovely message from Shani, Bari and Tina Fisher.

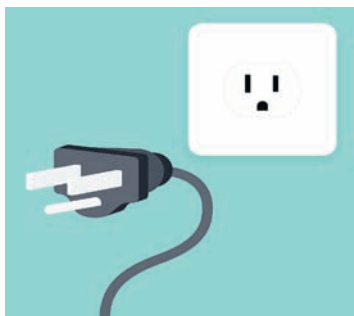
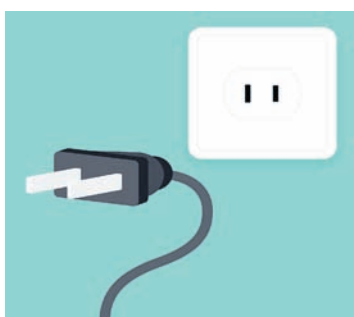
They wrote to us saying: "We have been coming to Aruba for so long we have lost track of how many years it has been after 20 years!"

Sisters Shani & Bari, and their aunt Tina, countdown the days all year until their annual visit. They shared the reasons why they come

back, from A to Z! And they're already planning to return in 2024!

Aruba A to Z: Aruba Today, Bugaloe Beach Bar; Chabad Aruba; Divi Divi Trees; Eduardo's Hideaway; Florins; Grouper; Hilton friends; Iguanas; Jokes at Aruba Ray Comedy; Keshi yena; Lots of laughs; Massages at Spa del Sol; Nice people; Oliebollen; Palapas; Quiet time; Roundabouts; Superfoods; The Butterfly Farm; Unwinding; Verkade chocolate bars; Wacky Wahoos; Xtraordinary sunsets; Yemanja; Zzzzzs on the beach.

Thank you for sending us this wonderful message sharing what Aruba means to you with us and our readers! □



(Oranjestad)—When traveling to another country, especially for the first time, it is always better to be over-prepared than under-

Helpful tips for your stay on Aruba

prepared. That is why we have a list of basic—but important—information that we think may come in handy to Aruba's visitors.

Emergency services

Even though most people don't even want to think about having to contact emergency services—especially not while on their vacation, it is still important to know what number to dial in case of the unlikely event of an accident or severe incident.

Police: 100
Police Tipline: 11141
Ambulance: 911
Fire Dept: 115
Oranjestad: HOH hospital:

+297-527-4000
San Nicolas: ImSan: +297-527-8833

Electrical power

Aruba generally operates on 110V to 127V supply voltage and 60Hz. There are also three types of outlets used on the island: type A with two flat prongs; type B with two flat and one grounding prong, and on occasion, type F with two round prong and two earth clips on the side. However, Type A is most commonly found in homes and establishments.

Drinking water

The water that flows through the sinks of every

house, hotels and other establishments is distilled and perfectly safe to drink. Aruba's drinking water exceeds WHO's international standards for water quality, so there is no need to buy bottled water from the store.

Supermarket hours

Supermarket hours may vary depending on where you are staying on the island. Generally though, most supermarkets are open from 8am to 9 or 10pm, Monday through Saturday. On Sundays, supermarkets generally close earlier; mostly around 2pm.

Taxis

Prices for taxi fair are set by the Department of Public Traffic and are based on destination rather than mileage. Most taxis can take up to five passengers, but this may vary depending on the vehicle. Taxis are pretty much always available and you can ever hire one for \$45 an hour.

Safety

Aruba is one of the safest islands in the Caribbean, and many tourist that visit have often told us how they feel safe to explore the island or walk around at night. However, rare incidents do occurs, so keep yourself and your belongings safe. □

Did you know about... Basic driving rules on Aruba (part 1)

(Oranjestad)—Have you ever felt confused when you're driving on the highways or backstreets of Aruba? Then we present a simple guide to some of the basic rules of Aruban traffic, along with some tips for things to look out for.

Speed limit

Legally, the speed limit on the four-lane highways is 80 km/h. This speed limit also counts for the main roads that are connected to the highways. The minimum speed is 50 km/h. Most people drive around 60 km/h on the main roads and about 70 km/h on the highways. There are also areas that indicate a speed limit on a sign; these are usually around populated and school areas.

The four-lane highways contain the left-lane, also known as the "fast" lane for each direction. Here is where vehicles can drive up to the maximum speed. However, legally it is not permitted to drive for long periods of time on the left lane. This lane is primarily designed for drivers to switch lanes before a roundabout, for example, if your exit on the roundabout is on your far left. The general lane to drive in—both at maximum and minimum speed—is on the right lane.

Roundabouts

Speaking of roundabouts, it is important to know where you have to enter and drive on the roundabout to make your exit. A good rule of thumb is to count the exits starting from your right side. So, exit 1 would be on your right; exit 2 would be straight ahead; exit 3 would be on your far left and exit 4 would lead to the road paralleled to the one you're on, heading in the other direction.

Most roundabouts have these 4 exits, so they are relatively simple. When you're driving on the four-lane highway, it is important to know when to switch to



the left lane to make your exit: if your exit is on your far left (exit 3), then you need to switch to the left lane on the high way before nearing the roundabout so you can take the path that leads you directly to your exit. If your exit is on your right or if you're going straight ahead, you can keep driving in the right lane of the highway.

It's also important to know that vehicles about to enter the roundabout must yield to those already on it. A good rule of thumb is to look out if someone is coming from your left side.

However, other roundabouts can be quite tricky

to navigate...

Watty Vos Boulevard (the "paperclip" roundabout)

Probably the biggest roundabout on the island, the "paperclip" roundabout on the Watty Vos Boulevard is one of the trickier roundabouts that could—and has—caused confusion among both tourists and locals. However, once you take a good look at it, it's fairly simple. The basis is just the same as a regular roundabout (left exit? left lane! etc.), but instead of having four different exits like on a regular roundabout, now you have two extra; one on the right and the other on the left side of the roundabout. The rules

don't change at all, you just have to keep an extra eye open.

Airport roundabout


Ah, yes. The infamous airport roundabout. The favorite roundabout amongst local, because of its easy (hard) lanes that never (always) cause confusion among drivers. Sarcasm aside, this roundabout can be tricky to enter, especially when you're driving from the direction of the airport heading. When you're driving away from the airport reaching the roundabout, you'll be faced with three lanes. The far right lane is to take the exit 1 out heading east (right lane of highway). The middle exit is

used for exit 1 (left lane of highway), 2 and 3. The far left exit is used to only exit on exit 3 (left lane of highway) and 4.

"Las Americas" roundabout

The Las Americas roundabout is located near the Talk of the Town hotel, west from the airport roundabout. This roundabout may look like a regular roundabout—and for the most part, it is. However, when you are driving from the east going in the direction of town, please take note that there are two exits on your right.

When you're driving towards this roundabout, you'll notice that the road becomes wider, splitting into two lanes. The right lane is used to take the first and second exit on the right. If you want to exit straight ahead, you must drive on the left lane!

It's always scary to drive in new places where the traffic may look and work differently, but once you get it right once, you'll get the hang of it in no time. Additionally, all roundabouts and roads on Aruba have signs and arrows painted on the road to help guide you. So take your time, keep your eyes open and don't forget to wear a seat belt! 



Aruba's underwater wonderland

ORANJESTAD - Exploring the underwater wonders is something you should definitely do during your stay in Aruba. The underwater world has everything to offer that makes a snorkel trip so exceptional; an impressive, colorful sea life with exotic fishes, turtles and beautiful coral reef. The historic shipwrecks, located on the Aruban seabed are also worth a visit. Aruba is known for its white beaches and blue oceans, which means there are many fascinating under water spots, where you can take your snorkeling gear and we selected the top spots for you.

Tres Trapi

Tres Trapi means tree steps in Papiamentu, Papiamentu is together with Dutch the official language spoken on Aruba. The beach is called Tres Trapi because it is accessible by the tree steps carved into the rocks. Tres Trapi is a small rocky beach, located on the north-western side of the island, approximately 5 to 10 minute drive from Palm Beach. From the unique steps you can easily walk over the beach into the clear and turquoise blue ocean. While snorkeling you will encounter all kind of tropical fishes and sea stars. The kind of starfish you will find in the Aruban waters is the red cushion sea star. This is a starfish that is commonly found in the shallow waters of the Caribbean sea and if you are lucky during your snorkeling visit to Tres Trapi, you may come across one of the green sea turtles. Respect the animal, keep your distance and enjoy the view. Also remember; it is a once in a life time experience.

Antilla shipwreck

Antilla is a 400-foot-long long ship, built in 1939 in Hamburg, Germany. Antilla came to Aruba, because it

had to find a neutral port. When Germany invaded the Netherlands on May 10, 1940, the crew decided to let their own ship sink, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Dutch Navy. Antilla lies on its portside in Malmok bay, and the sunken world war two ship is now one of Aruba's most popular snorkeling and dive spots. However, the ship wreck can only be reached by boat. The ship is visible from the surface and during your snorkeling trip you be surrounded by hundreds of tropical fishes, but the ship wreck alone is already impressive enough.

Baby Beach

Baby beach; a white beach, with a crystal blue ocean. The beach is located on the southern part of the island. On the way to the famous beach, you will drive through the old capital of Aruba, San Nicolas. The old Aruban culture can be still felt and experienced here, so do not hesitate to get out of your car and walk around for a while. Baby beach is a child friendly beach, since it is shallow and the water has a pleasant temperature. The name therefore fits well with the beach. Baby beach is an excellent beach for snorkeling, especially if you want to go with small children, because the water remains shallow and there are still many underwater wonders to see. In the ocean there is an area marked until where it is recommended to snorkel and on the beach you will find different facilities. It is a perfect beach to spend your day snorkeling and relaxing.

Mangel Halto

Mangel Halto beach is located in Savaneta, on the southern-west part of the island. The beach is different from the other beaches in



Aruba; it is beach full of mangroves. You reach the beach by a bridge through the mangroves and then you will have several entrances to the sea. There are diverse spots where you can enjoy a perfect beach day, wooden stairs made to enter the water and a dock to sit on and enjoy the view. Mangel

Halto is also worth a visit for the snorkeling experience. Inside the bay, the water is clear and you find many colorful fish. Outside the bay is a bit more challenging for beginners because of the wind and the waves, but the coral is alive and it is just like snorkel heaven. □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 TV, radio, etc.
- 6 Get smart
- 11 Glorify
- 12 Dome-shaped home
- 13 Leaving in large numbers
- 15 Sinking signal
- 16 Museum focus
- 17 Summer, in Paris
- 18 Crooked
- 20 Grownup
- 23 Takes it easy
- 27 Prudent
- 28 Database option
- 29 Apply, as force
- 31 Account
- 32 Follow the outline of
- 34 Boar's mate
- 37 Flamenco cheer
- 38 Greek X
- 41 Kicking back
- 44 Brat's opposite
- 45 Cash drawers
- 46 Face features
- 47 Like conga lines

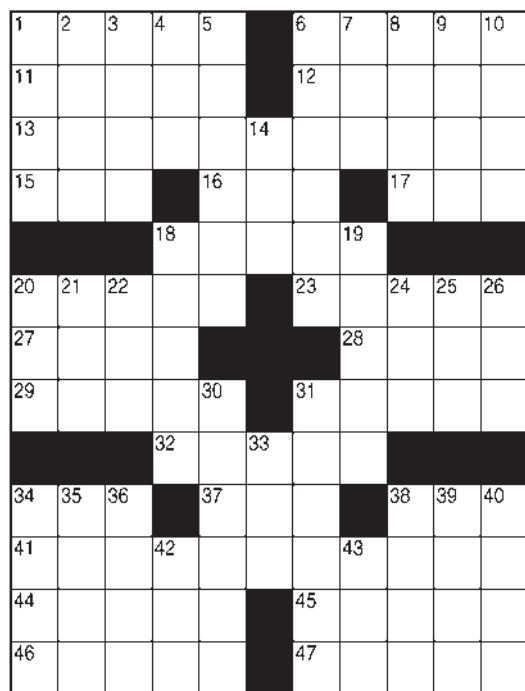
DOWN

- 1 Base meal
- 2 Trade fair
- 3 Speaker's platform
- 4 Suffering
- 5 Finally
- 6 Beam above a door
- 7 Nest item
- 8 Lotion additive
- 9 Decisive defeat
- 10 Jot down
- 14 Tick off
- 18 Wide awake
- 19 Squander
- 20 Really impress
- 21 Twice cinq



Yesterday's answer

- 22 Take advantage of
- 24 Menagerie
- 25 Drop the ball
- 26 Messy room
- 30 Fantasy characters
- 31 Perfumes
- 33 Boxing great
- 34 Checkout act
- 35 "Dear me!"
- 36 Costume parts
- 38 Soda choice
- 39 Unwieldy ship
- 40 Tiny
- 42 Writer Harper
- 43 Collins base



12-19

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-19

CRYPTOQUOTE

RTVGGVE JG FYV GVHGSQ
NYJBY VQDHDVG FYV NYSTV
NSKTE JQ H BSQG XJKHBO
SC TSLV. — YHIJTFSQ
NKJDYF IHRJV

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: YOU CAN GET EXCITED ABOUT THE FUTURE. THE PAST WON'T MIND. — HILLARY DEPIANO

More retailers are charging return fees. Here's how to pay less



A shopper carries bags down Fifth Avenue on Nov. 25, 2022, in New York.

Associated Press

By KIMBERLY PALMER
of NerdWallet

If you're someone who likes to return and exchange gifts after the holidays, prepare yourself: Making returns could feel a little different this year. "It's going to be hard for consumers to navigate," says shopping expert Trae Bodge. "The return policies are all over the place." The biggest change, she adds, is that more retailers are charging fees for returned merchandise. About 40% of online and brick-and-mortar retailers are charging fees for returns this year compared with 31% last year, according to David Morin, vice president of customer strategy at Narvar, which handles shipping, tracking and returns information post-purchase for online retailers. Those return shipping or restocking fees are generally \$3.99 to \$9.99, he says. The good news is there are ways to minimize return fees and in some cases avoid them altogether. Here's what experts recommend.

REVIEW RETURN POLICIES IN ADVANCE

Because retailer return policies vary so much and many have recently changed,

Morin recommends checking the return policy before you make any purchases, even if it's at a store where you've bought from before. "Many retailers are offering an extended return window during the holiday gift season, but always look at the fine print," he says. In many cases, says Samantha Gordon, deals editor for Consumer Reports, return windows are shorter than in previous years. "A lot of retailers extended their return policies because of the pandemic, and we're seeing those accommodations go away," she says. For shoppers, the return experience is a critical part of whether they enjoy their interaction with the retailer and become repeat customers, says Spencer Kieboom, co-founder and CEO of Pollen Returns, which partners with retailers to help them manage returns. For that reason, he says, "I always check the return policy."

JOIN THE LOYALTY PROGRAM

One of the easiest ways to avoid fees is to join a retailer or brand's loyalty program, which often comes with perks like free returns.

The only downside? Doing

so means being on the receiving end of promotional emails about sales and discounts. If you want to limit the amount of marketing going into your primary email account, Bodge suggests setting up a separate email for shopping-related messages. For Bodge, the pros of joining loyalty programs outweigh the cons. "You can earn points to get free things, you get access to exclusive sales and free merchandise. It's a good practice," she says.

DO THE LEGWORK YOURSELF

Shoppers can also often avoid return fees by taking the item to the store themselves. "Most retailers are happy to have consumers visit their store," Morin says, so they generally make in-store returns free. Drop-off locations have become more prevalent, he says, for example with Whole Foods and Kohl's accepting Amazon returns for free.

Always keep the receipts, tags and original packaging until you know whether you'll be making a return.

RESEARCH ITEMS MORE BEFORE PURCHASING

Taking the time to select the correct item in the first place can negate the need for returns altogether, Bodge says. "If you're not sure about something, go into the store so you're not taking a chance," she says. Gordon agrees: "Before you buy it, make sure you want it. Don't just buy the thing that's on sale." Similarly, if you're buying a gift, think carefully about the recipient's sizing and preferences before making your selection.

BUDGET FOR EXTRA FEES

Return fees are likely here to stay, so Bodge recommends preparing yourself, and your budget, for them. "Ultimately, you may have to pay a return shipping fee between \$5 and \$10 each time," she says. "We should expect to pay for returns for most retailers eventually." Morin agrees. "Free returns for everyone all the time is likely an unsustainable proposition," he says, especially given the widespread and growing prevalence of online shopping. □

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24/7

Study bolsters evidence that severe obesity increasing in young U.S. kids

By **MIKE STOBBE**

AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new study adds to evidence that severe obesity is becoming more common in young U.S. children.

There was some hope that children in a government food program might be bucking a trend in obesity rates earlier research found rates were dropping a little about a decade ago for those kids. But an update released Monday in the journal Pediatrics shows the rate bounced back up a bit by 2020.

The increase echoes other national data, which suggests around 2.5% of all preschool-aged children were severely obese during the same period. □



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23/26 weeks remaining
\$12 K each
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Fire Dept.	115
Red Cross	582 2219

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Prof. Taxi	588 0035
Taxi D.T.S.	587 2300
Taxi Serv. Aruba	583 3232
A1 Taxi Serv.	280 2828

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American Airlines	582 2700
Avianca	588 0059
Jet Blue	588 2244
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That's a wrap: Bryant Gumbel and HBO's 'Real Sports' air their last episode after 29 years

By DAVID BAUDER

AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For the last few years of its life, HBO's "Real Sports" taped its episodes on the same Manhattan block where CBS' "60 Minutes" resides. They shared a sensibility along with a neighborhood.

But while "60 Minutes" rolls along in its sixth decade, the monthly sports magazine helmed by Bryant Gumbel is calling it quits in its 29th year. The final, 90-minute episode premieres Tuesday at 10 p.m. Eastern.

Sports was a lens through which the magazine looked at all manner of issues, winning awards for pieces on corruption at the International Olympic Committee, labor abuses as Qatar prepared for the World Cup, concussions in sports and children forced to be jockeys for camel races in the Middle East.

"Real Sports" told some inspirational stories, like Mary Carillo's profile of the Hoyts, a father who ran marathons pushing the wheelchair of his son with cerebral palsy son, and flashed humor.

Who won or lost? There were other guys for that. "I'm OK," Gumbel said before taping the last episode.



Sportscaster Bryant Gumbel appears at the HBO 2015 Winter TCA in Pasadena, Calif., on Jan. 8, 2015.

sode. "I'm sad, but everything has to end at some point and this is the right time for this to end."

Backstage, a cart filled with champagne was wheeled down a hallway. Correspondents, producers and their families wandered through offices, saying farewells. Gumbel's wife, Hilary, and his grandchildren settled into seats in

the control room to watch the final taping.

A LONGTIME ENDEAVOR

Gumbel is 75, at the end of a contract, and HBO is now controlled by a company, Warner Bros. Discovery, on the hunt for cost savings. While the show's exit makes sense, the fear is that a form of sports journalism is leaving for good, too.

"It has been the gold stan-

dard in sports journalism on TV for the last three decades and it really is quite a loss," said Mark Hyman, director of the Shirley Povich Center for Sports Journalism at the University of Maryland. "It checked all the boxes: timely, ambitious, well-funded, independent."

Increasingly, sports news comes from outlets owned

by leagues, like the NFL or MLB networks, or networks whose businesses depend greatly on winning rights deals, he said.

"The show tried to do some things in sports journalism that no one else was doing," Gumbel said. "I think it was one of the few avenues that could honestly explore issues without having to worry about ratings or sponsorships or relationships."

"I've been on the other side of that coin," he said. "I've worked for networks who were what they would call now the 'broadcast partner' of a sports entity. And you'd only be a fool to think you can follow any story wherever it wants if it collides with that relationship. Life doesn't work that way."

When athletes agreed to appear on "Real Sports," they knew they were agreeing to a challenging interview, much like "60 Minutes" guests knew what they were signing up for, Carillo said.

Now athletes can control their own messages through social media or outlets like The Players' Tribune, she said.

"I wish we could have kept going," she said. "But times have changed." □

Associated Press

Russell Brand questioned by London police over 6 more sexual offense claims, U.K. media say



Comedian Russell Brand performs at "Eddie Murphy: One Night Only," a celebration of Murphy's career, at the Saban Theater in Beverly Hills, Calif. on Nov. 3, 2012.

Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Comedian Russell Brand has been questioned for a second time by police investigating sexual offense allegations, British media reported Monday.

Brand, 48, was interviewed under caution last week over six "non-recent" allegations, the Press Association news agency reported. Brand was questioned by police in November over three other claims.

London's Metropolitan Police did not identify Brand but said in a statement that a man in his 40s attended a police station in south London for a second time on Dec. 14.

"He was interviewed under caution by detectives in relation to a further six, non-recent, sexual offenses," police said.

British police do not name suspects who have not been arrested and charged.

In September, British media outlets published claims by four women of being sexually assaulted or raped by Brand between 2006 and 2013, at the height of his fame. The accusers have not been named.

The comedian, author and "Get Him To The Greek" actor has denied the allegations, saying his relationships were "always consensual."

Two U.K. police forces, the Metropolitan Police and Thames Valley Police, launched investigations against Brand after the claims were published. The BBC, where Brand worked on radio programs from 2006 to 2008, also launched a review into his behavior. □

Seattle's Julio Rodríguez tops pre-arbitration bonus pool at nearly \$1.87 million

By **RONALD BLUM**
AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Seattle center fielder Julio Rodríguez will receive the largest amount in the \$50 million pool for pre-arbitration players, earning \$1,865,349 to bring his two-year total to \$3,416,199.

Arizona outfielder Corbin Carroll is second at \$1,812,337, followed by Baltimore catcher Adley Rutschman at \$1,798,439, Atlanta right-hander Spencer Strider at \$1,692,833 and Chicago Cubs left-hander Justin Steele at \$1,673,331, according to figures compiled by Major League Baseball and the players' association.

Tampa Bay shortstop Wander Franco gets the 13th-highest bonus at \$706,761. The 22-year-old did not play after Aug. 12 and was on the restricted list from Aug. 14 through the end of the season while MLB and authorities in the Dominican Republic investigated an alleged relationship with



Seattle Mariners' Julio Rodríguez and umpire Chris Guccione watch the flight of a errant throw as Rodríguez goes on to score against the Houston Astros in the fifth inning of a baseball game, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2023, in Seattle.

a minor.

MLB and the union agreed to the annual pool in their March 2022 labor settlement in an effort to get more money to younger players.

Rutschman's two-year total is \$2,975,994, Strider's \$2,770,127, Steele's \$1,956,458 and Franco's \$999,545.

Showing the strength of young cores, Baltimore had

seven players earn \$7.3 million and Seattle had six garner \$4.1 million.

Ten players earned more than \$1 million. The others to reach seven figures were Orioles right-hander Kyle

Bradish (\$1,666,786), closer Félix Bautista (\$1,467,094) and infielder Gunnar Henderson (\$1,428,001), along with Texas catcher Jonah Heim (\$1,060,306) and Cleveland right-hander Tanner Bibee (\$1,016,931). Bibee and Cincinnati infielder Matt McLain (\$445,873) were among 17 players to earn payments after making their debut this year.

Several of the eligible players have long-term contracts. Franco had a \$2 million salary this season as part of a \$182 million, 11-year deal, Rodríguez a \$4 million salary in a \$209.3 million, 12-year deal, and Carroll a \$1 million salary in a \$111 million, eight-year agreement.

A total of 101 players will receive the payments under a plan aimed to get more money to players without sufficient service time for salary arbitration eligibility: 2 years, 228 days of major league service for 2022. □

Associated Press

WNBA changes Commissioner's Cup format with each team playing 5 games over 2-week period

By **DOUG FEINBERG**
AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The WNBA is changing its Commissioner's Cup format, playing half as many games and contesting them all during a two-week period in early June.

Teams now will play only five games once against every other team in the conference which is down from the 10 in the first three years. The old format had teams playing one home game and one road game against each other that counted toward the Commissioner's Cup. Now, some teams will play three games at home while others will play two. They will alternate each season who has the extra home game. "The newly designed, concentrated structure for this in-season tournament adds

an increased sense of urgency and excitement as we place a particular spotlight on Eastern and Western Conference Commissioner's Cup play in a two-week window near the tip-off of our regular season." WNBA Commissioner Cathy

Engelbert said.

Games will be played between June 1-13. The championship game will be played on June 25 at the home of the team with the best record in Cup play. New York beat Las Vegas on its homecourt to

win last season's Commissioner's Cup title.

In the old format, games were spread out over the first half of the season, making it more difficult to know which games were Commissioner's Cup contests. The games still count toward a team's overall win-loss record in the 40-game league schedule.

"The games will all be concentrated in a two-week period, which is a nice way for fans to follow it," Engelbert said. Teams will again compete for a \$500,000 prize pool, with a charitable component for each game. "We'll give same amount if not a little more," Engelbert said of the prize money. "They'll be the same pool of charitable donations." The NBA just finished its first in-season tournament, with the Los Ange-

les Lakers taking home the title. Lakers players on standard contracts each made \$500,000 and the losing Indiana Pacers received \$200,000 apiece. Players on two-way deals take home half those amounts.

The New York Liberty players each received around \$30,000 for winning the WNBA's in-season tournament. Players on the losing Aces got about \$10,000.

NBA franchises also had different courts at their arenas designed for the in-season tournament games. Engelbert didn't expect that to happen any time soon in the WNBA. "This is all about the competition on the court," she said. "It's a pretty expensive endeavor. We would like it to look a little different and will work with our broadcast partners to look different." □



Commissioner Cathy Engelbert speaks at the WNBA basketball draft Monday, April 10, 2023, in New York.

Associated Press

Josh Allen and the Bills show how quickly things can turn around in the NFL

By **ROB MAADDI**
AP Pro Football Writer
Turnarounds happen quickly in the NFL.

Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills have quieted talk about coach Sean McDermott's job security with a pair of impressive wins.

The Dallas Cowboys suddenly look like pretenders because they can't win on the road.

Joe Flacco has gone from his couch to becoming a Cleveland folk hero in less than a month.

Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs just needed a trip to New England to get back on the winning track.

Tommy DeVito was the toast of New York and New Jersey until the Saints whipped the Giants and mocked his celebrations.

The Eagles are shaking things up like a desperate team searching for answers instead of a division leader battling for the No. 1 seed. The up-and-down Jaguars still sit in first place despite three straight losses.



Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen (17) waves to fans as he walks off the field after playing against the Dallas Cowboys in an NFL football game, Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023, in Orchard Park, N.Y.

At least Brock Purdy, Christian McCaffrey and the San Francisco 49ers are consistent.

The game of Week 15 turned into a dud when Buffalo dominated Dallas

and exposed the Cowboys in a 31-10 victory Sunday. In the process, Dak Prescott's MVP bid took a hit.

Allen helped the Bills (8-6) save their season in a win

at Kansas City last week and watched James Cook carry the offense by leading a stellar rushing attack against the Cowboys.

Allen completed only seven passes against Dallas because Micah Parsons and the rest of the defense couldn't stop Cook, who ran for 179 yards.

"We weren't physical enough," Cowboys cornerback Stephon Gilmore said. "They were more physical than we were."

Now, nobody is talking about firing McDermott. Buffalo still has a shot to win the AFC East. The Bills need to gain one game on the Dolphins (10-4) to make their showdown in Miami in Week 18 for first place. The Cowboys (10-4) visit the Dolphins next week while the Bills visit the Chargers (5-9). "The NFL is a one-week-at-a-time league," McDermott said. "We're on a short week. We've got a couple guys banged-up. We have to go out West so that'll be a challenge in itself."

Flacco knows all about the fickle nature of life in the NFL.

The former Super Bowl MVP was unemployed before the Browns signed him to the practice squad on Nov.

20. He stepped into the starting lineup three weeks ago and has led Cleveland to consecutive wins with 300-yard passing performances in both games.

Flacco overcame three picks and rallied the Browns to a 20-17 victory over Chicago. Cleveland (9-5) leads the AFC wild-card race despite starting four quarterbacks this season.

"Obviously, Joe made some unbelievable throws there when we needed them," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Just can't say enough good things about how he played in that fourth quarter."

The Chiefs avoided the first three-game losing streak in the Mahomes era with a 27-17 win over the hapless Patriots.

Mahomes threw for 305 yards and two TDs and also had two interceptions, including one on a ball that bounced out of Kadarius Toney's hands. Mahomes, who threw a tantrum on the sideline last week after Toney's offside penalty negated a go-ahead score in a loss to Buffalo, was fuming after the play.

But Toney's mistake didn't cost the Chiefs this time around.

"Losing three straight in this league really puts you in a tough spot and I thought the guys did a good job," Mahomes said. "That's a really good defense. Offensively, we scored points early. On defense, shut the door, kind of like they've been doing these last few weeks, but we have to continue to get better and better." The Giants had won three in a row behind DeVito before running into New Orleans. DeVito was sacked seven times in a 24-6 loss and the Saints mimicked his finger celebration after big plays.

The loss put New York (5-9) on the brink of playoff elimination.

The Eagles clinched a playoff berth without taking the field but they made a big change. □

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